

## Thicker

It was raining, and the light, consistent taps on the roof worked alongside the blowing fan and the creak of the swinging ceiling light to fill the inside of the small, bare room. A young man in a dark green suit, and a middle aged woman in a colorful jacket, covering a solid red turtleneck, sat opposite each other at a desk, the only piece of furniture in the room. It had been oddly busy tonight, the woman being the fifth customer in just under two hours, and the man was silently eager at the pace that the night seemed to promise. She'd sat down, and after exchanging pleasantries, had handed over a crisp one-hundred dollar bill, which he accepted with a smile, and a laugh at the joke she had made, before reaching into his desk to pull out a crystal ball, and setting it atop the wood.

"And you said you aren't a fortune teller," she joked, as he laid the ball down on the wood.

"Just a tool of the trade, ma'am. Now, if I could ask you to remain silent for a few moments." He took both her hands in his, forming a circle around the ball, and began rubbing her palms with his thumbs. After a few minutes of gazing into the ball, closing his eyes and taking deep breaths, he released his grasp. She looked at him expectantly. "Well, this seems very promising, but I'll have to do a palm reading to make sure I didn't read the veil incorrectly." She nodded and held out her palm. He traced the lines that are commonly used for life, love, and fortune, muttering all the while. He stopped just as quickly as he began. "Yes, that's just what I thought. I don't know if it will be the cancer that kills you or not, but you will live another six years, four months, eighteen days and two minutes."

"Oh, well that's just wonderful news then," she gushed as she stood up to leave. "I'll have to thank Tracy for recommending you. You do remember her, don't you? Petite woman, fond of sweaters and little blue hats."

"Yes, I believe I do. She still has about nine years ahead of her, if memory serves."

"That's exactly right! My, if that isn't remarkable. You must have an astounding memory. Thank you again, and I'll be sure to mention you to some of the others around the hospital." And with that she opened the door, and stepped through. The man's call for her to have a safe trip home barely squeaked through before the door clicked shut.

Then it opened again. A burly man in a plain white button-up, dark jeans and a black tie stepped through, but didn't shut the door. "Got somebody else coming in, Alex, looks like they're a couple."

"Thank you. Go ahead and show them in." He began to tap his fingers on the desk, looking at his various drawers and wondering which method he would use. His hand hovered over that drawer that contained the set of bones he used sometimes. Instead of opening it though, he opened the drawer below it, looking at the contents. He hadn't used that drawer in a while, and decided that it was the one. He settled in and adjusted the knot on his tie, taking a sip of water and composing himself. The door opened and a young man in a corduroy jacket and black jeans came in, leading a young woman by the hand.

Alex's eyes widened and he scrunched a little lower in his chair, a reaction to the sudden vacuum that the girl's presence brought to the room. All the light and heat seemed to suddenly empty out of the space, filling her and blackening Alex's senses to everything else. Suddenly every move she made was in sharp contrast to the dull shimmer of the environment around her, and Alex could hear her breath as a dull echo in his head, feeling her natural scent cascade over his skin and tingle in his nostrils. He concentrated to clear his initial reaction before it proceeded to the stabbing feeling of his own ribs poking into his heart. Though he'd had this experience thousands of times, it always left him in a state of shock, and when he escaped it, he was visibly relieved, the utter despair that painted his face disappearing, so that he may return to his neutral expression.

"Welcome," Alex got out, after forcibly clearing his throat. "Are you two truly aware of what you're doing, coming here?"

The man laughed. It was a carnal, guttural sound that made Alex wince internally. "I don't really give a shit. We were just bored as fuck and she," he said, motioning violently at the young woman, "didn't want to go back to the apartment yet."

"Bored? My dear sir, people who are bored should not seek my services. I offer truth, not childish games."

"Cut the bullshit. My man down on Fourth told me all about how you'll pull some voodoo shit to give me a laugh. You want my money, don't you?"

"Well, of course sir. I do need to eat and pay rent." Alex let out a chuckle which caused a visible shudder in the man, and incited the woman to grip his forearm tightly. "I simply prefer to ensure that my customers fully understand the nature of the information they will get from me."

"Heh. Here you go with your mind tricks. I know, I know," he said, half snarling, his teeth showing between his lips. "This is all part of your show. Guess this is the crap I'm paying for." He pulled out a packet of bills and handed Alex two fifties.

Alex slipped the bills into his inside pocket quickly. "Which one of you will I be reading then?"

"The fuck do you mean, which?"

"You've only paid for the truth for one of you." Alex glanced back over the two of them. "If I may make a suggestion," he pointed at the half-concealed woman, "I'd like to read you. Or perhaps the gentleman would like to pay for another?"

"Fuck that! A hundred bucks a goddamn person?"

"For the truth."

The young woman began to tug on his arm. "Lea, I don't like this. Maybe we should just go." She grasped a small golden cross in her other hand, and drifted slightly closer to the desk.

Alex whipped his hand out quickly and grasped her arm, raising his head to meet her eyes. "*Ave Maria gratia plena, Dominus tecum.* Be calm my sister." Her eyes widened at his sudden motion, but her concerned face became smooth after a moment, and she nodded her head.

Lea looked from Alex to the woman cautiously. "Naw...fuck that shit. We've come all the way out to this fuckhole of a neighborhood." He directed his next comment to Alex. "You want to run your scam on her? Fine by me. I'll just watch and laugh." He gave a preview of what was to come, letting out another guttural laugh, and Alex clenched his fists under the desk.

"Fine. Is that acceptable ma'am?" She nodded slight assent. "Then we will begin," he said, genially, attempting to dispel any discomfort that could be lingering in the air. He opened several drawers, their contents cluttered and seemingly shoved in helter-skelter, on his side of the desk and pulled out a very formal looking piece of paper, an odd fountain pen, a shot glass and a bottle of clear liquid. These things he placed with perfect precision on the desk, the paper centered and the other objects lined up in a straight row five centimeters from the edge.

"This," he gestured to the sheet, "is the contract I will need you to sign in order to make this transaction. And you will, of course, need to use my special pen." Doubt began to cloud the girl's eyes again, and Alex lay a comforting hand over her arm.

"Why, what's special about it?" she asked, pulling her arm to her chest and rubbing the spot where his hand had previously rested.

"As the gentleman will no doubt exclaim soon, it's just part of my voodoo horseshit scam that I'm running."

"What's that for then?" Lea was pointing at the bottle and glass.

"That's just a special concoction to allow me to see past the veil."

Lea snorted. "Booze you mean." He laughed, this time causing Alex's mask to break as he frowned and closed his eyes, his forehead wrinkling.

"Whatever you'd like to believe. Now, ma'am –"

"Jaime," she said, cutting him off.

"...Jaime then. I'm going to need to strap this pen onto your wrist just so," he said, tongue between his teeth, as he secured the buckle around her slender arm.

"What's it? Ah!" She exclaimed as a needle shot from the back of the pen and through her flesh. Blood immediately began pouring into the main chamber of the pen. Almost immediately, it stopped, and the needle retreated back into the metal tube. Alex was ready with a wipe and a bandage.

"To prevent infection. Wouldn't want you getting sick." There was the slightest hint of mirth at her disapproving look at his concern. "Now, if you'd just sign here at the bottom. I assure you, it details only the procedure and the information I offer and asks for your consent. Nothing hidden here." Alex smiled. Lea squinted at the text as Jaime scrawled a name across the bottom.

"No point in stopping now then, is there?" she said.

"No, I suppose not, ma'am. Quite excellent." He rolled up the sheet and slid it back into the drawer, then he poured a glass from the bottle, and removing the pen from her wrist, squeezed several drops of her blood into the shot glass, ignoring their looks of mixed confusion and disgust. The bottle was truly full of nothing but water and a cleansing agent. Alex didn't want to catch anything that may be in her blood, after all.

"Bottoms up." He drained it in one swift motion. Then he emptied the pen's reservoir of blood onto his finger tips, closed his eyes, drew a cross on his forehead and then smeared a swath under his nose, inhaling deeply several times, in between chants of "*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*" He sat with his head low for a long moment, breathing shallowly, and just when the two customers began to shift uncomfortably, he opened his eyes and fixed Jaime with a sad gaze. "You may ask the young man to leave before I tell you what I've found, if you wish."

"No way man. I paid for this. Besides, I'd never leave a girl in a room with a creepy motherfucker like you."

"I did not direct my statement at you, sir," Alex said sharply, his face melting into a determined maliciousness for only a second before returning to its neutral shape. "This is deeply personal information, and it is her decision whether she wants you to know it."

She licked her lips and sputtered out, "No, he can stay. This is just a show anyway." Lea's face split into a triumphant grin at hearing that.

"So be it. Through my interactions with the other side, I have gleaned that you have only thirty-seven minutes to live."

Lea let out a thunderous laugh. "Oh that's just great. You do know how to tell a joke, after all." Alex's hands gripped his knees as he fought to keep his face steady and his eyes open as his head pounded with the sound of a jackal's snarls.

"I thought you might react that way. I've finished the service you paid for, so if you're quite through with criticizing my occupation, you may kindly get the fuck out." Jaime and Lea were stunned at the sudden change in tone, but Lea recovered quickly.

"I don't think so, buddy. I've decided that I'm gonna save myself the time of coming back here tomorrow, and take my money back now." He pulled a switchblade out from the waist of his pants and flipped it open. Then the door suddenly banged open and the burly man from earlier, and another, smaller, but equally intimidating man came in. They were both wearing the white-button up, tie, and dark jeans.

The first man spoke, "Now now, mister, we don't need to have any trouble. The boss has gone and done what you've paid for, so maybe you ought to just scamper home if you don't want that knife of yours to be sheathed in your spinal column."

Lea backed away from the desk slowly, doing his best to avoid the men at the door, which left him flush up against the wall. He was holding the small knife up defensively, clearly startled at the sudden emergence of such intimidating men. "No...no way, man. This sunavabitch-"

His words cut off in a gulp when Jack, the taller of Alex's guards, slid towards him, grasping his wrist right below the knife's handle. "I suggest you drop the knife, and get the fuck out of here." There was no noise for several seconds besides Alex's even breaths and the sound of the knife dropping to the carpeted floor. Jack let Lea go, and he brushed past him to grab Jaime's hand and head out the door. Jack turned to Alex. "You all right boss?"

"Oh yes. That was quite a show though, wasn't it? But I knew everything was going to turn out alright." He lifted his right hand up from under his desk and placed a nine-millimeter on the hard wood. "I'm going to be closing early tonight," he said as he stood up and gathered his long black coat. He pulled a handkerchief out of a drawer and wiped the blood off of his face, simultaneously slipping the pen into his coat pocket and tossing the other items back into his drawer haphazardly. The shorter man, Oscar, opened his mouth in protest, but Alex cut him off, "You'll still get a full night's pay." At that, he opened a drawer and pulled out two wads of twenty dollar bills and tossed them to their respective owners. "And here's a bonus. Since you've got so much extra time, go ahead and have a go at some Jane on me." He handed them each one of the two fifty dollar bills that Lea had paid him with.

Outside, rain was falling lightly and steadily, having been going for long enough to completely darken the cement of the alley that Alex's office opened up into. He looked up at the sky, the immediacy of the darkness outside of the gentle illumination that the light over

his door offered oppressively forcing itself around him. The sky was little more than the grey and darker grey swirling of rain clouds. Alex flipped up the collar of his coat to get as much protection as possible and then slid a pack of cigarettes out from the inner pocket. He pounded the box on his palm, pulling one out and lighting it, taking several draws before moving towards the alley's only exit.

Unlike in the calm of his office, outside, Alex had to concentrate hard on finding the vacuum of sensation that someone so close to death left in their wake. The world dulled, and a thin trail of radical light and her smell lead out towards the neon lights of the city. Alex let it lead him towards the end of the alley that ended in Milicent Street, walking a leisurely pace, knowing he still had a full half an hour to catch up to the two. At the corner where the alley opened up to the world outside a woman stood half concealed in the shadow of a small niche in the wall.

Her face was completely obscured with facepaint that successfully fused Asian influences and elements of Celtic war paint, with a subdued white as the main attraction, but bright red lips and dark blues around her eyes and on her cheeks. Her hair was brought up under a hood, hiding its true length and color. These two effects effectively made her indistinguishable from any of Yove's other girls, who Alex could pick out from their distinct face decoration.

"Oi, Alex, you done already? So early tonight." She didn't solicit him, having learned that it was little use.

"Got business to attend to," he replied, avoiding eye contact and keeping his gaze even with the low-hanging neon lighting on the other side of the street that he was exiting onto. His focus dropped a bit, and his perception of the world slid to the right as he fought to keep sight of the trail.

She straightened herself, removing her right foot from the wall she was leaning on, her heels now making the telltale noise of her walking to match pace with him. "Those two that came by here a minute ago you mean? Which one is it?"

"The woman." He could only spare enough focus to give short, brusque answers, for fear of making it harder to follow the trail than it already was. "Go see Jack and Oscar. I'm busy."

She stopped short then, allowing him to distance himself from her, and called out "Maybe I just will then," annoyance at his nonchalant dismissal of her clearly coming through, but Alex barely heard her, his senses ignoring any non-essential part of the external world. After waiting for his answer, she turned around and went back into the alley.

The street was much brighter than the alley, with countless neon signs glowing and flashing in a way that gave it the appearance of an otherworldly twilight. Immediately to Alex's right was the strobing orange and green sign of a Chinese themed strip club called *The*

*Dancing Panda*. It danced off the plastic sheen of his longcoat and the water pooling in the gutters of the road, the black asphalt distorting the image to a sick reflection of the original image of a panda spinning on a cane of bamboo. In his current state, the lights were no more impressive than pinpoints in the dark however, and served only to increase the effort he had to put out to maintain his trance. This was normally Alex's stop, as an entrance to the subway lay just ahead. The fading trail, however, continued past the declining stairs set in the ground and around to the right at the intersection of Milicent and Union.

Alex took the last puff of the cigarette that he'd been nursing since he left his office and cast it to the side, the burning end dull in the twilight atmosphere. It fell to the earth, landing with a sizzle in the water streaming into a sewer drain. Alex glanced at his watch. It had already been ten minutes since he left, which meant that Jaime should only have about twenty minutes left. He quickened his pace, urgency entering his step as he became more intent on making sure that he could catch up to the pair before her time was up.

Five minutes later, Alex was still trailing the soft sensation of Jaime's fading aura. He'd been walking at the quickened pace for several blocks and was beginning to wonder if he had spent too much time back at his office. He was contemplating the merits of beginning to run down the street in hopes that he could make up for his earlier lazy pace, but he did not relish the thought. The prospect frustrated him and prompted him to pull out another cigarette as he mentally prepared himself for the impending physical exhaustion. He'd brought the flame up to his mouth before he stopped, focusing on the sound of a prolonged crash pouring out of the mouth of an upcoming alley. Alex ducked into the alcove where a set-in door sat between two display windows, back pressed tight up against the bars that barricaded the shop at night. Someone came out of the opening, and by the smack of his footsteps on the wet pavement Alex could tell that, whoever it was, was running with a limp.

The sounds of sobbing became noticeable then, having grown from a near silent whimper in the dark. It was followed by an angry but controlled tone saying, "Bitch, shut up." The sobbing continued to grow louder for several seconds before a loud smack reverberated through the night air and a louder, less controlled voice called out again, "Bitch, I said shut the FUCK up!"

After a minute of not being able to hear anything more from the alley, Alex wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and placed the cigarette back between his lips, finishing the act of lighting it. He caught sight of his watch as he drew the cigarette out of his mouth and quickly did the math, allowing for twelve minutes until her time was finally up. He hunkered down, kneeling and resting his back against the cool steel bars behind him as he puffed away, turning his head up to blow the smoke into the air. He stayed that way for nine minutes, lighting a second when the first was reduced to ash and a butt on the pavement beside him.

As he was finishing the second one he heard another person emerge from the alley, walking with urgent calmness.

Alex rose from his place and walked out to the street, eyeing someone on the opposite side of the street. With help from the glow of the city he could see red spots bleeding into the cracks in the sidewalk, spiderwebbing down the road with the help of the still gentle rain. The red ran down the street in the opposite direction that he came from for as far as he could see, originating at the alley. Alex watched it drain away before finally stepping into the urban crevice, letting his eyes adjust to the dimmer lighting as he slowly made his way further in.

It continued to get darker as he proceeded into the alley, stepping around the few piles of broken glass that he could see to avoid, and stepping onto others with a loud crunch that his slow, even stride, prolonged as he lifted his foot. He scanned along the walls of the opening, looking for the bright, obvious crumpled pile that could be Jaime, knowing that he still had two minutes and that her life should still be calling him. He almost missed her, almost walked right past her as she was shoved up against the far side of a dumpster, concealed by a ratty, moth eaten blanket. He let his senses clear, allowing his normal perceptions to return to normal, and moved towards her.

He lifted the blanket with no special ceremony or pomp. He just grabbed hold of it and pulled it away, tossing it nonchalantly behind him, and was immediately greeted by a bursting crimson blossom that poured from her abdomen, clothes ripped askew and doing a poor job of concealing her body. Alex stood, staring at her, for a long moment, eventually her still, glassy eyes moved up and to the left to look directly at him, but he couldn't be sure if she was actually even seeing him, her loss of blood and shock likely affecting her ability to process anything anymore. Her mouth began to move, weakly, but move nonetheless, and Alex could read in her eyes that she was asking for him to save her.

"I can't save you," he started as he crouched down, and began to dig into his pocket in search of the pen, "but, I can remember you, and hopefully you can rest knowing that your death will contribute to my life." Her only response was to reach up and grab hold of his arm, but she didn't have the strength to grasp him, and it quickly fell back down to her lap, covering a lot of what her clothes failed to cover. Alex worked, unperturbed by her attempt, on unscrewing the pen at some threads halfway down, exposing the needle, and flipping it around to make it look almost exactly like a syringe. He checked his watch again, and with thirty seconds ready to go, he ripped the last remains of her shirt and bra away so that he had better access to her heart.

He looked into her eyes again, and saw only pitiable fear and hatred. He noticed that her face and mouth were free of blood, and with several seconds still to spare, he placed his hand behind her head, feeling a sticky mess where it was likely beaten into the wall she was



laying against, and brought his head low for a long kiss. When he pulled back, her eyes were closed, and as he got ready to stab the needle through her breast bone and into her heart, he liked to think her fear had been replaced, though by what, he didn't know. He kept an eye on his watch, then, waiting for the crucial moment, and as the time ticked down, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, he prepared to pull the syringe plunger back, drawing out a vialfull at the exact moment that she finally died, her blood more full of life than it had ever been before.

He withdrew the needle, and unscrewed the top of the syringe, pulling out a packet of the same cleansing agent that had been in the water he'd drunk early as a part of the show. He poured it in, watching it react with a small fizz, and the blood bubbled a little before quickly settling. Alex replaced the cap, sealing the liquid, bright against the dingy background of the alley, and rolled back the sleeve on his left arm. He stretched his arm out, finding a vein at the interior of his elbow, easily, because of practice, and unceremoniously jammed the needle in, expelling the blood into his body. A feeling of desperate euphoria filled him as he leaned back against the dumpster for support, but once it was over, he rolled his sleeve back up, stashed the needle back into his pocket, and headed back towards the dancing neon lights of the city.